

# Reflections from USDA Forest Service Employees on Institutional Constraints to Engaging and Serving Their Local Communities

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## ABSTRACT

Although community relationship building has been recognized since the early 1980s as integral to forest management, it has not been widely supported or adopted. Today, relationship building depends largely on the innovation and commitment of forest supervisors and staff. The institutional environment and its culture play an important role in building capacity for relationship building with communities at each unit, as well as supporting employees' attempts to serve local communities. The research presented takes an in-depth look at the institutional constraints to engaging and serving local communities from the perspectives of 20 USDA Forest Service personnel from three units. Research findings reveal agency, unit, and employee level constraints including, diminished resources, increased departmentalism, staff turnover, and long-distance commuting. We recommend that the Forest Service provides opportunities for successful relationship building efforts and assesses innovative techniques in a Community Partnerships Demonstration Project.

**Keywords:** communities, relationship building, USDA Forest Service, institutional constraints

... The objective of the Forest Service for many years was to care for the land and serve the people, but we're not really serving the people anymore. We can't respond to that anymore. We've cut back so much that at the trench level, in the trenches, we just can't serve the public quite like we did in the past. Those times are gone. (Mark Twain National Forest employee)

Throughout their careers, our current generation of foresters has been told of the benefits of working with the public. In 1984 Hendee asserted that the

public "is increasingly distrustful of decisionmaking by technical experts" and argued for reestablishing the *human* element of forestry (Hendee 1984, 340). He encouraged forestry professionals to build relationships with the public and to integrate forest management and community planning.

One way of establishing the human element of forestry has been through public participation in collaborative planning processes. The literature on collaborative plan-

ning in natural resource management is well developed. Collaborative decisionmaking processes have been touted as a means for integrating scientific and local knowledge (Koontz et al. 2004), inspiring social learning (McCool and Guthrie 2001, Schusler et al. 2003), and creating more effective and longer-lasting decisions (Shindler et al. 2002).

Although less profuse, attempts have been made to identify various barriers to collaborative planning, as well. For instance, Selin et al. (1997) surveyed 115 USDA Forest Service employees about their use of collaborative planning and whether or not efforts to involve citizens in decisionmaking processes have been effective. They learned that employees supported collaborative planning and believed it to be important to acknowledging multiple forest values and strengthening communication and cooperation, especially with respect to conflict resolution and goal setting. At the same time, they uncovered some obstacles to collaborative planning including employees' personal agendas and the limitations imposed by the

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**Table 1. Participant profile.**

	Gender		Age (mean, yr)	Years in community (mean, yr)	Involved in community orgs. (%)	Years at unit (mean, yr)	Years with FS (mean, yr)	In upper management (n)
	Female (n)	Male (n)						
Hiawatha (n = 6)	3	3	50	22	100	16	22	1
Mark Twain (n = 7)	3	4	51	19	43	13	19	2
Midewin (n = 7)	4	3	47	4	100	4	16	2
Total	10	10	49	15	76	11	19	5

FS, USDA Forest Service; orgs, organizations; yr, year.

Federal Advisory Committee Act of 1972. LaChapelle et al. (2003) interviewed 28 participants in four planning processes in the western United States, including agency employees, advocacy organization representatives, and landowners, to identify common barriers to resolving natural resource conflicts. According to these researchers, institutional design was a fundamental barrier from which other constraints, including procedural obligations, inflexibility, and lack of trust emerged. Institutional culture and processes and, in particular, the distribution and use of power among agencies, special interest groups, and local communities, were perceived as problematic in collaborative planning. Similarly, in their synthesis of several collaborative planning processes across several natural resource agencies and units, Wondelleck and Yaffee (2000) described a “lack of administrative flexibility” and “constrained resources” as major obstacles to effective collaboration.

Another way of establishing the human element in forestry, as Hendee (1984) suggests, is through relationship building in local communities. In some cases, this means formal interactions at agency- or community-sponsored meetings between forest managers and community officials, but, more commonly, relationship building occurs through informal, day-to-day interactions and exchanges between on-the-ground staff and landowners, business operators, and residents. According to Frenz et al. (2000), community relationship building has the potential to benefit communities by contributing to community economic stability, cohesion, and social equity. As these authors point out, the Forest Service stands to benefit from relationship building, as well:

Good community relationships could lead to increased community support for national forest planning and management activities, creation of a positive work environment, mobilizing local knowledge about the national forest and a local workforce and volunteer force, and ideally, result in

collaborative stewardship of forest lands. (Frenz et al. 2000, 551)

Furthermore, building enduring and trusting relationships with local community members will help inspire local community participation in planning processes, making them more meaningful (Carroll and Hendrix 1992).

The research presented takes an in-depth look at institutional constraints to relationship building across three different forest service units from the perspectives of 20 Forest Service personnel. Rather than focus on perceptions of or participation in collaborative management, this research is more broadly concerned with agency relationship building with local communities and their residents. Specifically, this study builds on previous research on barriers to public participation in collaborative processes by examining what institutional constraints exist to engaging and serving local communities.

### Study Approach

Forest Service employees from the Hiawatha National Forest (Hiawatha) in Michigan, the Mark Twain National Forest (Mark Twain) in Missouri, and the Midewin National Tallgrass Prairie (Midewin) in Illinois were contacted and interviewed in 2003 and 2004. A purposive sampling strategy was used to capture a range of employee perspectives on the agency-community relationship. In qualitative research a sample is drawn to understand a particular phenomenon in-depth, rather than to statistically represent a larger population (Berg 2004). With this objective in mind, we interviewed 20 participants representing different tenures and positions within the agency (Table 1). On average, participants were in their late 40s, had been Forest Service employees for 19 years, and had worked at their current unit for 11 years. One-half of the participants were women. Five of the 20 participants held positions in upper management,

such as district ranger or supervisor. The other 15 participants held staff positions such as information assistant, timber sale administrator, or interpretive specialist. Data analysis followed procedures described by Strauss and Corbin (1990) for coding, organizing, and interpreting the interview text. Several strategies were used to enhance theoretical sensitivity and ensure the trustworthiness of findings as described by Marshall and Rossman (1998). Because this study’s purpose was to explore subjective meanings in qualitative data through inductive analysis—consistent with interpretive research paradigms (Samdahl 1999)—words, themes, and categories were not quantified.

### Reflections on the Agency-Community Relationship

**The Challenge of a Disengaged Community.** Study participants were asked to describe their unit’s relationship with the local communities, as well as their own individual relationship with community members. Although many participants offered positive assessments of many aspects of the agency-community relationship, the challenge of engaging the community as a whole was clearly evident. Participants from each unit recognized various degrees of disengagement and levels of distrust among community members from indifference to skepticism to resentment.

It is important to note that the extent to which disengagement and distrust were considered a problem varied. Most participants acknowledged that apathy was a significant problem in their communities. For example, in describing the community’s participation in planning processes a participant said, “The community gets involved at the administrative level, maybe the mayors, and the aldermen, the upper echelon in the community, the Jaycees. But as a whole I don’t think the community gathers around. I know they don’t. I don’t think the commu-

**Table 2. Constraints to engaging and serving the local communities.**

Agency-level constraints	Diminished resources Centralized power structure Focus on accountability
Unit-level constraints	Traditional public involvement techniques Technical jargon Increased departmentalism Staff turnover
Employee-level constraints	Long-distance commuting

nity cares” (Mark Twain Staff). This indifference and detachment was commonly attributed to a lack of understanding of the agency or a lack of incentives to get involved. Some participants recognized that distrust in the agency exists among the local people but believed it to be limited to a “vocal minority.” To these participants, a certain level of distrust is “business as usual” in federal land management. According to others, however, persistent distrust has taken its toll on the agency-community relationship, the unit’s ability to be effective in management, and even employee morale. For instance, one participant recalled an interaction with a community member at a local restaurant:

... Some people at another table were talking and they were really mad at the Forest Service because evidently when they got through with [a land] survey, they didn’t have as much land. When they noticed that I was sitting there, one person went ahead and talked like he didn’t care if I was in uniform ... and the other one goes “shhhh. . . .” There have been a few people who have told me that we don’t wear our uniforms when we get off from work, because some people get really mad at us. (Mark Twain Staff)

### ***Institutional Constraints to Engaging and Serving the Local Communities.***

The results presented here focus on the ways in which institutional culture and procedures constrain the Forest Service’s ability to engage and serve local communities. Although constraints associated with communities also were described by participants, they are not the focus of this article. Institutional constraints existed at three different levels (Table 2). Agency-level constraints were tied to the agency’s diminished resources, focus on accountability, and centralized power structure. Unit-level constraints included increased departmentalism, use of technical jargon in planning documents, and reliance on traditional forms of public involvement. Employee-level constraints included long-distance commuting and staff turnover.

***Agency-Level Constraints.*** *Diminished Resources.* Many participants expressed great frustration with diminishing financial and human resources in the Forest Service. Budget cutbacks and staff shortages were perceived as major constraints to engaging and serving local communities. Several participants noted that staff shortages have meant fewer people and less time to interact formally in agency or community sponsored functions, and, perhaps more importantly, informally in day-to-day interactions with community members. One participant acknowledged that her unit does not have enough staff to attend community meetings and events. She explained,

I think we just don’t have either enough people or enough time to work on [the relationship], to dedicate to have somebody at every Kiwanis Club meeting, that really personal stuff. . . . I think that’s the biggest thing to reaching out and spending the time to go to local clubs, whatever is important to the local people. We do what we can, but I think if we did more, it would be a benefit. (Hiawatha Staff)

Other participants admitted that they do not have the time to visit with community members informally as they once did:

We get frustrated because with budget cutbacks, less people here. . . . There used to be three full districts on the west side, now there are two offices and most of the people are shared. So, used to be that [community] folks would stop a lot and talk to people, or you’d stop in the stores when you’re out and buy ice cream or coffee or something and talk to people. We don’t do that anymore. So. . . I’d say we don’t do the outreach that we used to do, the amount we used to do. (Hiawatha Upper Management)

Diminished resources also have affected the unit’s capacity to meet agency goals and policies. According to some staff members, recreation services and law enforcement have been impacted.

It can be frustrating because I know that the objective of the Forest Service for many years was to care for the land and serve the people, but we’re not really serving the peo-

ple any more. We can’t respond to that any more. We’ve cut back so much that at the trench level, in the trenches, we just can’t serve the public quite like we did in the past. Those times are gone. The recreation budget is a prime example. (Mark Twain Staff)

We’ve got laws, regulations; we’ve got all these policies, this and that and everything else, but we have no enforcement. So it’s a big laugh in the community. The government’s got all these policies and there isn’t nobody out there to enforce them. So why even bother putting it on paper? People know what they can get away with. So they laugh at it. And I’m not saying everybody, but a lot of people that I know. (Hiawatha Staff)

According to another participant, staff shortages have meant an increased reliance on volunteer groups for basic maintenance responsibilities.

The government is downsizing all the time. There’s not enough of us, if it was all left up to us to do. We have the Senior Citizen Program. They help us care for the recreational sites and go out and do the mowing and stuff. If we didn’t have the volunteers that come down and help us keep the trails clean, there’s no way that we could handle everything that there’s out there to handle, because we just don’t have enough bodies to do it, and not enough money in the budget to do it. So we depend on the people out there, we couldn’t do it without them. (Mark Twain Staff)

Increased user fees emerged as a constraint on the agency-community relationship. One participant noted irritation in the community over declining service and added fees. She said, “There are a lot of frustrations among the general public and the community because of the lack of service and the way the government is changing. Everything used to be free, but now they have to pay for everything” (Mark Twain Staff).

***Centralized Power Structure.*** Participants identified the agency’s structure and, in particular, the centralized system of decisionmaking as inhibiting the unit’s ability to be responsive and address problems in a timely matter. This constraint was especially significant to Mark Twain and Hiawatha staff members interviewed.

The rules and regulations are very political-oriented, and they’re above the small, slow pace of the communities, it’s a dominating government, it’s a dominating agency with lots of rules and regulations that just don’t bend, and these people in these communities for generations have been bending and willing to do anything they had to, to get along, and then this big agency comes in. . . . those rules and regulations are not made locally. If these districts were left to manage the process locally it would be much, much better, but we are not allowed

to do that. There's no, how do I say it, personal touch that we are really allowed to extend, as much as we'd like to. (Mark Twain Staff)

... When the National Environmental Policy Act came into existence, you know, and that brought a lot more opinions in on what should be done. It wasn't local any more entirely. Before that, I think local residents had a little more say in what happened, than they do now. Because now we have to consider everybody's opinion, whether they live in Munising or Detroit or some other area. So, I think they may feel that they've lost a little bit of control over what they used to have. (Hiawatha Staff)

*Focus on Upward Accountability.* Several participants suggested that the agency's underlying agenda has shifted from serving the people to accountability. As one participant explained, "upward reporting" has become a major priority. A few participants intimated that on some levels accountability has supplanted land management and service.

Overall, the Forest Service is becoming just too internally focused, upward reporting-focused. I mean Congress, you know, that's a big part of our constituency. Our bosses may represent the public, so we have a lot of upward reporting that way and it takes a lot of time. And it seems like more and more from higher levels, there's a bigger priority put on that, than on our local connections that are public connections. So, it makes it really hard at this level. Sometimes you feel like upper levels have forgotten what it's all about. . . . At those higher levels folks [need to] remember that and gear the processes to serving people on the ground again. (Hiawatha Upper Management)

The land management aspect has kind of gone by the wayside and everything hinges around accountability and "well, what are we going to get sued on this?" or "how would this stand up in court?" and just the whole changeover, the environmentalists appealing our environmental document and just all of that has created. (Mark Twain Staff)

Participants also described how heightened procedural requirements and increased paperwork have protracted permitting programs and stalled on-the-ground projects:

I am a person that works day in and day out with the general public on whatever their needs are. And there are some policy needs that should be resolved sometime soon. There's so much going on in the district that it's hard to encapsulate here, but as an example, we have a lot of people putting in for guide permits. They want the hunt guide, they want the fish guide and we really haven't addressed that on district yet. I know that's a big thing out west, but with poor ownership in most of the eastern forest, I don't know where that's going to go. But yet people have applications. . . . I've got some applications that are three years old on that. Until we get a decision from the

Forest or the policymakers on how they want to handle that, I don't foresee these things moving forward. (Mark Twain Staff)

Participants observed that an "internal focus" has drawn resources away from land management and building community relationships. One participant proclaimed, "I spend most of my time entering data now instead of working with field people and getting their problems and issues resolved" (Mark Twain Staff).

*Unit-Level Constraints. Traditional Public Involvement Techniques.* Continued reliance on traditional public involvement techniques has stymied efforts to engage the local community and build relationships. Staff members from Hiawatha argued that the minimum legal requirement for public involvement is not enough to stimulate local participation.

We publish our proposals in our quarterly newspaper that the forest puts out and it's called the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (NEPA) Quarterly, which, again, formally advises folks of projects that are starting up. So, yeah, we meet that formal requirement. You send someone a six-page somewhat technical document on what we're proposing and we send a bunch of maps out in that proposal. We meet the legal requirement, but I think frankly, John & Jane Q. Citizen, I don't know if that is the very best way to get to folks. Open houses or open meetings I think can help draw people in but frankly, folks are busy with their daily lives and they're bombarded with scoping letters, as we call them. I don't know. I'm not sure that's very effective. (Hiawatha Staff)

If you have an open house, the government has a formatted way that they are going to run the meeting, and I guess that keeps control in the meeting and everything else. And everything is spoken of in generalities. There's not a lot of specifics about certain public concerns. Where one person may have a concern about one area, you know, like he would say "such and such a road, I'm wondering what's going to go on with that road." So the facilitator would stand up in front and say "Well, in other words, what you're saying is you have concerns about roads in Hiawatha National Forest," and he says right back, "no I don't. I have concerns about that road" and they don't get into the personal answering of the specifics of that road or it will be, "Well, catch us later," but we can't write our plan to specifics like that. (Hiawatha Staff)

*Technical Jargon in Planning Documents.* Traditional top-down, formal communication styles have constrained agency-community relationships. Agency lingo was characterized as "legal jargon" and "all acronyms" and akin to a "foreign language." To several participants this adds unnecessary

complexity and confusion to planning documents.

You know, people will come here and pick up a copy of a draft environmental analysis, well, it's bigger than a Webster's dictionary. And there are very, very few people that will take the time or the energy to go through that and see exactly what's in there. And when it is in there, a lot of it is written in terms that I guess using the old term a Philadelphia lawyer would have a hard time understanding. So, they don't keep it simple enough. They make everything so complex. (Hiawatha Staff)

An employee in upper management suggested that in some instances agency jargon has the potential to mislead community members:

If you look at our history of decisions, I wouldn't say that I think we've been deceptive. . . . We knew that changing hunting habitat would be an issue, and instead of taking it on up front and saying, "you know, there aren't going to be trees around here guys." We couched the language in, "we're going to remove woody vegetation." Well, what does that mean? Certainly in the decisions that we've been working on [now], we're trying to lay that stuff out. (Midwin Upper Management)

*Increased Departmentalism.* An increasing amount of departmentalism or division of work within the units was characterized also as a constraint. According to a participant, functionalism within the unit has made employees more specialized and less responsive to community needs.

We've become more functionalized. . . . So as that's happened, I know less and less about what's going on in the other functions and so then when people approach me in the community and say "well, what's going on, why did they do that?" I have to say, "well I don't know, I just work here." But the last several years have been really frustrating for me. . . . They used to come in the door and say, "well I want to talk to a ranger" about this or that or something, and it was always somebody that was here to make the initial contact and field the questions and concerns and then take it from there. But now, more often than not, you hear people saying "well, you go up there to the Forest Service and they tell you, you got to see this guy—you've got to see that guy" and so I think there's a less personal relationship. (Mark Twain Upper Management)

*Employee-Level Constraints. Staff Turnover.* According to participants, building positive relationships with the local community takes time and "newcomers" to the agency can feel alienated. This was especially important to the Mark Twain participants. One participant explained, "Well I'm a newcomer, so I really just have made a big mark

on the community. A lot of people recognize who I am, but we're just now developing our relationship with this community" (Mark Twain Staff). Staff turnover is seen as a major constraint to developing personal relationships and building trust within local communities.

Generally, very positive. At times, it can be slightly alienated, they also know that there have been other rangers here before me and that I will probably be moving on one day, and so it's definitely not an unpleasant or unwelcoming feeling, it's just, when you work in an agency like the Forest Service, where you move around throughout your career, it's just, okay, they accept me, they will work positively with me, but they don't expect me to be here forever, and I don't expect to be here forever. . . . (Mark Twain Upper Management)

Throughout my career, I guess I've always felt like I was an integral part. . . . I was the Forest Service to a lot of the people in the community. As time went by, they begin to associate [participant's name] with the Forest Service and it didn't really matter even though my responsibility from time to time didn't deal with recreation or whatever. It's just, people still called you to complain about somebody out at the campground or whatever, I was the Forest Service. And some of the other technicians that worked here were that same way. Whereas the district rangers kind of came and went, even though they may stay here seven or eight years, but like I said to the people living here, well, they can be here eight years and still be considered a newcomer, they just didn't have a lot of direct contact and then through—over a 20-year span of time with the contacts, with the loggers, and you know I guess I felt like I was the Forest Service to a lot of these people and I felt good about that because I felt like I was doing good things and being fair to people and how I was representing the Forest Service's best interests, but I was also being a good neighbor to the community and that sort of thing. (Mark Twain Upper Management)

*Long-Distance Commuting.* Many participants recognized that not actively participating in the community on personal time can have a constraint on their relationship with the community. Several employees commute long distances to work from another community and, in turn, do not attend local meetings or join local organizations.

I mean there are some things I can get more involved with. . . with the community, but if anything, I guess that's changed somewhat dramatically in the last couple of years because I commute from [town name] to [town name]. I used to walk to work at [town name]. It was a five-minute walk. Now, it's a one-hour drive, so I lose two hours a day working and those. . . that time affects how much time I can have with the community, too. So, I think just by work-

ing another job site, having to commute limits my ability to do more community-type things. (Mark Twain Staff)

I think if I lived in the city of [town name] and participated in local community things, then that would certainly help me to get to know the city of [name] and this micro Midewin community better. . . . If I lived here and participated in town meetings and went to a local church and was actively involved in that, yeah that would help more in my relationship with the community. (Midewin Staff)

. . . nobody in the community really knows [employee's name] because he lives in [town name] and just drives here everyday, but if you ask anybody out in the community. . . [he]'s not at the basketball games, he's not in the grocery store, he's not in the church and that sort of thing and all they know is that they used to come to talk to somebody they knew and now, it's this other guy and then of course, a lot of times they still try to talk to me, but I've gotten to a point where I can only say I'm sorry, you have to go talk to this other guy. (Mark Twain Upper Management)

## Conclusions

The agency-, unit-, and employee-level constraints to engaging and serving the local community support and expand on previous research on barriers to public participation and collaboration. Lachapelle et al. (2003) and Wondolleck and Yaffee (2000) identified institutional inflexibility as a constraint to collaborative planning. Similarly, agency inflexibility, specifically its focus on upward accountability and centralized power structure, has constrained relationship building with local communities. Reliance on traditional public involvement processes and the use of technical jargon in the units have contributed to sluggish participation, frustration, and, potentially, distrust among community members.

However, what may be most enlightening from the Forest Service employees' perspectives is the significance of the *people* of the Forest Service to engaging and serving the local citizens. Participants emphasized how diminished resources, departmentalism, staff turnover, and long-distance commuting have reduced their capacity to interact with community members and organizations. The agency's budget shortfalls have drawn resources away from the field and the communities, as managers and staff respond to increasing procedural requirements with fewer staff. Departmentalism has divided workloads and in some instances reduced each employee's ability to respond to community member's questions and concerns. Staff turnover has reduced the

time communities and agency personnel have to get to know and trust one another. Long-distance commuting by agency employees has meant they are not out actively participating in the community and community organizations as residents.

One participant reflected on the evolution of the Forest Service and the importance of having personnel on the ground interacting with the community,

When the Forest Service was an infant organization, they were more part of the community; you might say they were the community. But as they grew from its infancy to a big dominant agency with lots of rules and regulations, yes it has changed. It has separated. No matter what we as an agency say, there's still the overbearing fact that you are government. The only way that a difference can be made is if people like myself, that are on the ground interrelating with the people, can interject a little personality. And I think that's all that saves us, is some of us are on the ground and we try to soften the blow a little bit. (Mark Twain Staff)

As the Forest Service and other agencies continue developing and implementing strategies to promote community participation in collaborative planning, one critical step that should not be overlooked is the day-to-day relationship building between the people of agency and community members. Many more local community members do not participate in collaborative management, than those that do participate. A focus on community relationship building then becomes critical to meeting the agency's mission. Based on the institutional constraints identified in this study, we have developed two overarching recommendations for the Forest Service.

**1. Provide Opportunities for Successful Relationship Building Efforts.** We recommend that agency and unit administrators develop, encourage, and reward activities that engage employees with local community members. At some levels the Forest Service has given significant attention to building partnerships in local communities, and there are several success stories on which to build (USDA Forest Service 2006). However, community relationship building still is not a widely adopted practice. Although there are pockets of activities and success, declining budgets, a shrinking workforce, and reorganized units, have made it difficult to sustain and expand these efforts nationwide.

Communication is the essence of community relationships. Generally, when community relationship building falls short or

fails it is because of breakdowns in communication. Oftentimes, new and fresh ways of seeing each other offer the best ways of fixing broken or stale communication channels. Agency personnel and local community members can work together to develop a communication strategy that will work for them. The strategy might include identifying community groups, upcoming community meetings and events, and upcoming agency meetings and events. Once identified, community and agency leaders can develop a calendar of meetings and events and identify one or two individuals who would attend each others meetings and events. Being a part of each other's meetings and events helps both the community and the agency to be accountable and transparent to one another in policy, planning, and management decisionmaking. It engages both parties in a policy setting that includes both public forestlands and private lands; makes each party aware of ongoing and proposed planning efforts on public and private lands; creates an awareness of potential policy and planning outcomes; and creates an environment where differences or potential conflicts in land management can be resolved in a collaborative and cooperative way. It also increases the likelihood that decisions made about public and private land management are more likely to be sustainable, lead to community economic stability, cohesion, and social equity, and protect ecosystem services at the landscape level.

At the forest level, depending on the type of meeting or event, employees could voluntarily adjust their work schedules to attend. Employees might be permanently assigned to a particular community group or community planning effort as part of the employee's regular duties on a planning team, or employees might be assigned on a rotating basis to attend two or three local community meetings or events a year. The latter would help employees get to know community members, what is important to community members, and how the community sees the agency as a partner in helping it reach its goals.

The foregoing strategy is but one possible way to bring about better communication, cooperation, and collaboration between the agency and neighboring communities. Varieties of strategies exist and are only limited by the imaginations of agency employees and community members. A key to improving communications is to look at communication desired between the parties, brainstorm about the best ways

to make that communication happen, choose a strategy identified from the brainstorming session, and try it out. To know how well the selected strategy is working, part of the strategy should be a timetable for assessing and evaluating outcomes of the strategy (i.e., is desired communication occurring, is there a greater degree of cooperation and collaboration between the parties, do the parties believe trust exists and is increasing between them?).

**2. Assess Innovative Techniques in a Community Partnerships Demonstration Project.** We propose examining the efficacy and efficiency of innovative relationship building techniques in a Community Partnerships Demonstration Project. A number of case studies exists that show what can be accomplished with effective relationship building, but these are individual examples. This project could be implemented with techniques replicated and monitored at a set of units. It would require the Forest Service to organize a task force made up of experts and leaders in community relations, Forest Service Administrators and representatives, and other local and regional partners. The task force would assess the costs and benefits of innovative relationship building processes aimed at improving communication, collaboration, and cooperation with local community members.

Often, the public does not see an agency such as the Forest Service as innovative. However, Forest Service success stories related to community relationship building are due in part to the agency's ability to be innovative and flexible. Organizing success stories from various forests into a qualitative framework might be a first step in identifying key elements at work within the communities these forests serve. The success stories could be organized by community members and "analyzed" by community members and Forest Service personnel. What is it about these local communities and the national forests they are near that makes the relationship work? Is it geography; local community culture, practices, and traditions; specific forest issues; personalities; and/or, the ways in which the communities and the forests organize themselves when working to resolve an issue or concern of importance to both entities? An organizing framework might help to identify not only variables related to community relationship building but also the combinations of variables distinct to different types of issues or concerns. The framework might also indicate where innovative thinking and ideas surfaced that

allowed community relationship building to continue and strengthen. Knowing which variables are most likely to impact specific kinds of issues and concerns and community relationship building can help the agency choose the type of training most likely to benefit its employees as well as key stakeholders in local communities.

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